

What Is Behind the Opportunism of the Left Groups that Support the Rebels in Syria

Syria is the latest acid test that clearly shows, within the so-called Trotskyist movement, which groups are revolutionaries that maintain and develop the Marxist method, and which groups are centrists who are being pushed toward far right centrism by events in Syria. Those who support the rebels in Syria, even if they are only on the side of the rebels militarily, are the centrists who are being pushed to the extreme right of centrism.

The support for the “Arab Revolution” within the centrist left goes way back to the 1950’s, when different segments of centrists around Pablo and Healy started to praise the “Arab Revolution” as the vanguard of the international working class. The concept of the “Arab Revolution,” which lacked any class content and methodological clarity, was used as an opportunistic excuse to tail bourgeois and petty bourgeois leaders such as Nasser, Ben Bella, Kaddafi, the PLO, and ironically the leaders of the Ba’ath regimes in Iraq and Syria.

There is a huge difference between today’s civil war in Syria and the different regimes and organizations in the Middle East that fought imperialism in second half of the 20th century. In the 1950’s-1970’s, these regimes and the PLO were involved in direct military conflicts with imperialism and Zionism. Thus it was the duty of revolutionaries to side with them militarily. But this did not stop centrists from tailing them politically as well, usually by hiding behind the banner of the “Arab Revolution.” Today, however, the method of centrism, which was bad to begin with, is transforming into a terminal disease. The centrists are not giving military support to forces that are in direct conflict with imperialism and Zionism, but rather, to forces that are trying to impose a brutal Islamic state in Syria. These forces are carrying out a jihad, or holy war, and do not hesitate to brutally murder anyone who opposes their desired Islamic state, or violates their Sharia law. In other words, the Islamists in Syria are waging war not only against Assad, but against all those who fight Assad and do not accept the Islamists’ version of an Islamic state.

The other forces that these centrists tail in Syria are those associated with the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The FSA wants to topple Assad by relying on an alliance with American imperialism. The FSA-allied forces want American intervention in Syria, as well as massive quantities of American weapons. The FSA has pledged in advance to become a puppet for American imperialism if it should succeed in taking power. We’ll explain later why the FSA has so far received only some of the weapons and training that it wants from the US and the CIA (the centrists’ explanation is typically subjective). But in principle, giving support to a faction (the FSA) that wants to become a puppet for one imperialist power (the US), against an opposing side (Assad) that is a puppet for other imperialist powers (Russia and to a lesser extent China) is a travesty of revolutionary Marxism and Lenin (we’ll explain the misuse of Lenin by the RCIT later).

A Summary of the Civil War in Syria

The Arab Spring in 2011 was not simply a series of popular “democratic” revolutions—a reaction of the masses to tyranny. There were two decisive factors that brought the masses into the streets. The obvious one was the economic crisis that started in 2008 and brought about a further decline of American imperialism and a stronger emergence of Chinese and Russian imperialism. The economic burden that the crisis imposed on the Arab masses was quite devastating. For each percent of unemployment in Europe, the Arab masses suffered up to 5 percent. As usual, the suffering in the semi-colonial countries was much worse than in the imperialist centers. The crisis in the Middle East took place as American imperialism experienced important political defeats in the Middle East. Despite its military victory, the US exited Iraq with its tail between its legs. Not only did the US lose Iraq as a client and a puppet, but the Iraqi Shiite regime has become hostile toward the US, gravitating instead toward Iran, and more importantly toward

Russian and Chinese imperialism. Suffering devastating economic blows, and seeing their hated imperialist oppressor weakening, the Arab masses took to the streets.

Yet the most important factor that brought about the upsurge throughout the Arab world was climate change. The ossified Left does not understand the importance of climate change to the class struggle and the future of humanity. The Left takes climate change only half seriously. But the level of barbarism in Syria directly corresponds to the growing effect of climate change on the political and economic crisis in the Middle East. The civil war in Syria is an example of the fate that awaits a growing number of countries, as capitalism and the so-called civilized world is replaced by open barbarism because of the growing effects of climate change.

Climate change played a big role in the upsurge in Egypt, as the price of wheat and bread skyrocketed, and became unreachable to many workers and the unemployed. In Syria, climate change played even a bigger role. In the years leading to the uprising against Assad, Syria suffered a severe drought (due to climate change) that exceeded anything in modern history. This is the kind of drought that triggered the beginning of agriculture and civilization, which ironically began in the Middle East about 10,000 years ago. The first protest marches against Assad, which triggered severe repression and the popular uprising, took place because thousands of poor workers were literally starving. The farmers could not produce, and the way Assad handled it only made things much worse. This stage of the uprising against Assad, which consisted of spontaneous mobilizations of students and workers, was completely supportable. By then, Syrian society was already disintegrating. Farmers could not produce enough crops to feed the population, and the resulting crisis, coupled with phenomenally high unemployment, triggered a process in which the drought and the civil war disintegrated the working class as a cohesive class capable of overthrowing Assad in its own united name. This is clearly illustrated by the fact that out of a population of about 12 million, about 6 million—half the population—have been displaced. Four million are displaced internally in Syria, and 2 million have left the country altogether.

The Role of the FSA

The disintegration of Syrian society, which never recovered from the devastating drought, and the lack of any revolutionary leadership capable of giving the working class any independent role in the uprising, created a huge vacuum that was filled by reactionary forces. The FSA, which initially consisted of deserters from Assad's army, has become a political tool for the exiled bourgeoisie. This bourgeoisie has promised American and European imperialism that it will become their puppet should they take power from Assad. The FSA commanders on the battlefields have not defied this capitulation to imperialism. Rather, they have extended the exiled bourgeoisie's political program into the civil war, by consistently asking imperialism for weapons. The FSA's strategy in the war depends on imperialist generosity with weapons, as well as on direct imperialist military intervention, as a way of toppling Assad. So why should revolutionaries support the FSA, even if only militarily?

Despite the claims of the opportunists in the RCIT, this is not a war of liberation against imperialism. Rather, it has become a civil war in which each side is relying on a different set of imperialist powers to win. The FSA is relying on Western imperialism, and Assad's forces are relying on the bloc of Russian and Chinese imperialism (though in the case of Syria, Russia is playing a dominant role). As Marxists, we cannot agree with the moral assertions of the opportunists that the brutality of Assad is a good enough reason to support the rebels. The critical question for us is not the level of brutality by Assad, but rather, which side the rebels represent: the ruling classes and imperialism, or the working masses. Besides, since 2012, many reports have confirmed that many of the rebel units have been as brutal toward civilian populations under their control as Assad's forces have been.

The role of the Islamists

So what about the Islamists? Within a period of two years, the Islamists have become a clear majority within the rebel forces. Their success should be attributed to the collapse of "civilization" in Syria, which

is no longer one unified political and economic state. As climate change intensifies, we should expect the balkanization of the world, with warlords and religious extremists replacing a collapsed “civilized” capitalism. This is what will happen if we fail to overthrow capitalism and replace it with socialism. Somalia and Syria are just the warning shots of what is coming.

There are a number of Islamic sects in Syria that lead the rebel forces. What they all have in common is a program of genocide toward non-believers. They all want to establish Sharia law in Syria and other Arab countries. In other words, they want to bring the world back to the Middle Ages and the Dark Ages, in which non-believers were simply executed in public. They implement Sharia law in the “liberated” areas that they control, and they kill people that they have declared non-believers without blinking an eye, sometimes making the brutality of Assad’s soldiers look almost civilized. In addition, they are killing the fighters associated with the FSA, as they compete for control over each piece of territory that is captured from Assad’s forces.

It is almost mind-boggling to understand why the opportunists from the Trotskyist movement give the Islamists military support. But as the Islamists forces grow at the expense of the FSA, it is becoming clear that the Syrian civil war is becoming two simultaneous civil wars: one is between the rebels and Assad’s forces, and the other is a growing war among the factions within the rebels. The independent forces of the workers and the oppressed ethnic and religious minorities do exist, though barely, but with the exception of the Kurds, they are almost entirely overshadowed by reactionary forces. In fact, most of the youth and workers who started the uprising do not support the rebels anymore. For the right reasons, these workers and youth see that the rebels are not better than Assad.

The opportunists’ arguments

Let us now roll up our sleeves and take on the arguments of the opportunists.

The RCIT is the most important centrist organization leading the opportunist chorus that argues for support of the rebels. The RCIT’s politics evolved from the politics of Workers’ Power (WP), with which they originally split. It is the politics of capitulation to Western Imperialism; this includes supporting Yeltsin in 1991 (as far as we know, so far they have not changed the original WP position on this issue), and support for “poor” Bosnia in the Balkan wars in the 1990’s. In both cases, the RCIT continues the old method of state capitalism, from which WP originated, and with which it claimed to have broken, though it was unable to complete the break. This brand of centrism has now been taken up by the RCIT, a group that is expanding internationally. It spouts a lot of good revolutionary rhetoric, but it tends to capitulate to imperialism when it comes to concrete acid tests.

Michael Pröbsting , the theoretical leader of the RCIT, writes that: “We called for the support of the rebel movement despite its Islamist and secular petty-bourgeois and bourgeois leaderships without giving them any political support.” (“US Administration: ‘Rebels fighting the Assad regime wouldn’t support American interests if they were to seize power,’” 22.8.2013:

<http://www.thecommunists.net/worldwide/africa-and-middle-east/us-opposes-syrian-rebels/>)

It is astonishing how the RCIT lines up militarily behind Islamist forces without seriously attempting to explain their position. These are, after all the forces that are brutally imposing Sharia law in their territories. So why are they better than Assad? It is sad to note that this opportunism has cost the lives of two of their comrades. When the RCIT sent their “brigade” to Syria, the comrades tried to have a military united front with Islamist forces, but their “allies” sent the comrades into a trap, and two of them died.

It was always the Bolsheviks’ policy that it was unthinkable to form a united front with pan-Islamist forces that wanted to turn the clock back to the Middle and Dark Ages. In his writing about the struggle of colonies against imperialism Lenin wrote:

“With regard to the more backward states and nations, in which feudal or patriarchal and patriarchal-peasant relations predominate, it is particularly important to bear in mind: . . . [¶] . . . third, the need to combat Pan-Islamism and similar trends, which strive to combine the liberation movement against

European and American imperialism with an attempt to strengthen the positions of the khans, landowners, mullahs, etc.;

“fourth, the need, in backward countries, to give special support to the peasant movement against the landowners, against landed proprietorship, and against all manifestations or survivals of feudalism...”
(<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/jun/05.htm>).

It is clear that the last thing that Lenin had in mind was to form a military united front with these “manifestations or survivals of feudalism”. These forces are the enemy that are rolling the human race back to a state of barbarism under which the “laws of God” are used as a justification for massacring not only “non-believers,” but even those that do not belong to a specific sect within Islam.

Comrade Pröbsting uses lengthy quotations from Lenin about struggles for liberation from imperialism to “prove” that it is correct to support the rebels who supposedly fight imperialism. But he does not produce any evidence that the rebels *are in fact* fighting imperialism, because if he tries he will have to lie or make a mockery of Marxism. The FSA does not claim that it is fighting a liberation struggle against imperialism. The FSA’s leaders have made it clear that they support US imperialism and are fighting for its interests. And the brutal imposition of Sharia law through the mass killings of non-believers by the Islamists is certainly not a liberation struggle against imperialism. Thus Pröbsting is left with one card to show: he present the massive arming of Assad’s side by Russian imperialism, and the fact that the West’s arming of the rebels has been at a low level by comparison, as the “proof” that this is a struggle against Russian imperialism. But this is unserious rubbish. The CIA is training the FSA’s fighters in Turkey and Jordan. Now the US is even officially supplying them with arms. The reason the US does not supply the FSA with a massive quantity of armaments has nothing to do with the so-called “anti-imperialist” nature of the FSA. The FSA has repeatedly begged the US to provide it with more and better armaments, promising in advance to become a puppet if it grabs power. The only reason why the US does not give the FSA-backed rebels massive amounts of arms is because the US is afraid that the heavy weapons will fall into the hands of the Islamists, **who are now much stronger than the FSA.**

The fact that the US does not like or trust the Islamists does not make the Islamists anti-imperialist fighters. Their aim is not to fight imperialism throughout the Middle East, but to impose a brutal Islamist state in Syria. The Islamists are not mobilizing on an anti-imperialist platform but on a Sharia law platform. If they take power, they are likely to collaborate with one imperialist power or another, just as Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood’s leader in Egypt, became a friend of Obama when he wanted to have “normal” relations with the US. No matter how one tries to twist the facts, the fact remains that this is civil war between different bourgeois and petty bourgeois factions, rather than a liberation war against imperialism. In such a war, it is incorrect for Marxists to side with one or several factions.

The RCIT has no clue regarding what is this war about. The RCIT minimizes what imperialism is about with phrases like: “The last two and a half years proved that US imperialism has no interest to intervene seriously in Syria at all.” (“US Administration: ‘Rebels fighting the Assad regime wouldn’t support American interests if they were to seize power’”

<http://www.thecommunists.net/worldwide/africa-and-middle-east/us-opposes-syrian-rebels/> 22.8.2013)

The US has many interests to protect in Syria. But it cannot intervene because the US is a rapidly declining imperialist power. The US just got a severe blow in Iraq. After spending billions if not trillions of dollars on the war in Iraq, the exhausted US army left Iraq and the US relinquished Iraq to its Russian and Chinese competitors. In Afghanistan the US is not doing much better than Iraq.

The US desperately needs to capture Syria because Syria is a buffer between two Russian and Chinese client states: Iraq and Iran. Yet as a declining power, the US would not dare to defy the Russians in Syria. The way the US changed its mind about bombing Syria after the chemical weapons attack shows that the US is losing the confidence it had as the primary imperialist power. The other imperialist powers have started to give more heed to Russia, the rising leader of the rival Chinese-Russian imperialist bloc. Thus, the US could not muster the support for the bombing that a superpower expects to get. Even the

British—the most faithful US ally—voted against the bombing, and the US had to abandon the idea. The decline of US hegemony as the main imperialist power is also why the US capitulated to Putin and agreed that the UN would disarm the chemical weapons in Syria as an alternative to direct US intervention—an intervention that the US has no confidence would have been effective in defending its interests.

In a sharp article, *the New York Times* illustrated how impotent and confused the Obama administration is about arming the rebels. Whenever a proposal to arm and train the rebels comes up, even those who argue for massive arming of the rebels admit that it is not likely to work because of the decline of the US and its inability to police the arming properly. The article said that:

“Two days after his [Obama] announcement that he would go to Congress for approval of a strike [against Syria], Mr. Obama met in the Oval Office with Senators John McCain of Arizona and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, the two Republicans who are the Senate’s most outspoken advocates of military intervention in Syria. Mr. Obama agreed with the senators that American efforts to arm the rebels had been slow, but told them that the first group of 50 Syrian rebels — trained by the C.I.A. in Jordan — would soon cross into Syria, according to sources familiar with the meeting.

“The goal was for that group to train larger numbers of rebels in Syria — expanding the impact of the limited C.I.A. training effort in Jordan. But Mr. Obama acknowledged that having the C.I.A. carry out the training covertly had slowed the pace of the program and suggested that he was considering expanding the program and carrying it out publicly, an allusion to having the Pentagon take over.

“The president’s enthusiasm for that approach soon cooled again. A week after the meeting with the two senators, Mr. Obama seized on a proposal by President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia, aimed at forcing the Syrian government to give up its chemical weapons stockpiles. That effort, adopted by the Security Council in late September, appears to have overshadowed the arming project.”
(http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/23/world/middleeast/obamas-uncertain-path-amid-syria-bloodshed.html?ref=world&_r=0)

So, the Obama administration is so weak and confused that it needs its archenemy in Syria, Russia, to show the US what to do! In many imperialist quarters a new question is on the agenda: who is the boss these days, the US or Russia?

The centrists’ political and theoretical poverty is just all over the place. They have no idea what dialectic thinking is. The most simple and basic law of dialectical materialism is that everything is changing all the time. That what happened yesterday is not necessary happening today; that the revolutionary tactics of yesterday do not always apply today. This is so basic that formal logic is sufficient to explain it. So, even many bourgeois scholars understand that the popular uprising against Assad that started in 2011 has changed dramatically by 2013; that it is no longer a spontaneous uprising by workers and youth against a dictatorship, but has become a civil war between several bourgeois and petty bourgeois factions. The opportunists, however, do not understand why rapid changes demand new political lines, and they are locked in yesterday’s formulas, such as that Syria today is like Spain in the 1930’s.

The RCIT and company love to assert that the popular uprising remains the overwhelming character of the civil war. This is a thoroughly subjective assertion that is being contradicted by the vast data of facts that stream from Syria. Nobody really thinks that any more, except for the stupidly detached opportunists that want to tail bourgeois factions of the “Arab revolution”. The masses in Syria follow neither the Islamists nor the FSA, but they are being killed by the Islamists when they whisper the slightest complaint. If the masses follow any faction it is because it is Shiite, Sunni, or Alawite—in other words, for the wrong reasons. What happened in Syria is what happens when the state disintegrates, and the working class is dismantled and cut off from the productive forces and thus becomes incapable of

fighting as a class. Once the Islamists gained control of a large part of the rebel forces, the civil war was transformed into a religious and ethnic massacre by all sides. These days the rebels are as brutal in their ethnic cleansing as the Assad forces. In Aleppo, the biggest city in Syria, where the rebels control a large chunk of the city, the Islamists pick out non-believers and factional opponents from the rebel camps and shoot them on sight. These days, the Islamists are fighting their rebel “allies,” by killing them and grabbing their territories, as much as they are fighting Assad:

“The Qaeda group, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, known as ISIS, routed local rebels to take control of Azaz two weeks ago and has since set up checkpoints around the town and taken over the bases of other rebel groups.” (New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/04/world/middleeast/syria.html?src=recg>)

This is a typical example of a growing reality in Syria, illustrating that the civil war is not between a unified rebel force and Assad, but rather among many forces who are all trying to carve out mini-states for themselves in Syria. In this civil war, it is not only Assad’s forces that slaughter people in villages and towns because they are Sunnis; the rebels are doing the same in Alawite villages. The participants in the following example of such massacres include not only Islamist forces, but some units of the FSA as well:

“Before dawn on Aug. 4, Raed Shakouhi, an olive and walnut farmer in a government-held hilltop village near the Syrian coast, just across a valley from rebel territory, was woken by gunshots and cries of ‘God is great.’

“Mr. Shakouhi, 42, hid among nearby trees with his wife and four young children. The next day, he emerged to find his uncle shot dead, his family’s possessions stolen or destroyed, and the streets littered with bloodstains and the carcasses of farm animals, he recalled last month in an interview in the state-run shelter where he now lives. Many of his neighbors here in Latakia and in the surrounding villages, mostly members of Syria’s minority Alawite sect, fared even worse.

“In a coordinated attack, numerous rebel groups fought off a small garrison of government troops and swept into the villages, killing 190 people, according to a [Human Rights Watch](#) report to be released on Friday. At least 67 of the dead appeared to have been shot or stabbed while unarmed or fleeing, including 48 women and 11 children, [the report said](#). More than 200 civilians are still being held hostage.

“The groups accused of leading the Latakia operation and committing the bulk of the atrocities include the extremist, foreign-led Islamic State of Iraq and Syria — which is also engaged in armed conflict with rival rebel groups — along with the Nusra Front, Ahrar al-Sham and two other Islamist groups that include foreign fighters.

“...at least 20 groups took part in the fighting, the report says, including some affiliated with the Free Syrian Army, the loose-knit collection of mainly Syrian rebel forces the council is trying to organize.

“And in a video filmed nearby during the operation, Gen. Salim Idris, who leads the military council, is seen insisting that his forces played a leading role, in statements responding to criticism from Islamist groups that his fighters were hanging back. The report said it was unclear whether forces linked to General Idris took part in the initial Aug. 4 attack, when forensic evidence suggests most of the civilians were killed. But it also said that anyone continuing to coordinate with such groups could be complicit in war crimes.

“The killings increased fear among the Alawite population, Syria’s largest religious minority. Alawites in the province of Latakia said in interviews that they were being indiscriminately targeted because President Bashar al-Assad and many government leaders are Alawites. During the attacks, an Alawite shrine was damaged and its sheik killed.

“The report did not find evidence that children had been cooked in pots, fetuses ripped from mothers’ bodies or women sexually mutilated, as some government supporters had contended. But it documented several witness accounts of women, children and elderly people being gunned down as they tried to flee and of the infirm being killed in their homes, as well as forensic evidence that victims had been bound,

decapitated or shot at close range.”

(New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/11/world/middleeast/syrian-civilians-bore-brunt-of-rebels-fury-report-says.html?ref=world>)

Human rights report: <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/10/11/world/middleeast/11syria-report-doc.html?ref=middleeast>)

This is not what a popular revolt against Assad would look like. Rather, it is a clear sign of a war in which all sides are reactionary, and in which each side massacres the masses who happen to belong to a rival religious group. It is a sign of the collapse of capitalist “civilization” in Syria.

In fact, the effects of climate change, coupled with the severe economic crisis of world capitalism that triggered the Arab Spring, are beginning to spread in Africa and the Middle East. A collapse of the capitalist state is visible in Somalia, Libya, and Syria. Iraq and Lebanon are becoming an extension of the civil war in Syria. In Iraq, the allies of the Syrian rebels kill dozens of Shiites every month, and the Shiite regime kills dozens of Sunnis as well. This is becoming clear to everyone who pays attention to the Middle East, but not to the sterile opportunist left. The RCIT and the rest of the opportunist left have no understanding of this. Their opportunistic appetite dulls them. Thus, the RCIT declares that:

“The highly instable situation in Libya since the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime, where thousands of workers and peasants remain armed and organized in popular militias, is a cautionary tale for the imperialists.” (<http://www.thecommunists.net/worldwide/africa-and-middle-east/syria-against-assad-imperialism/>)

This statement appears to imply that the militias in Libya are a great anti-imperialist force, ready to spring forth and battle against imperialism. But this is far from the truth. The militias in Libya are not progressive. Some of them are out and out Islamists, with the same agenda as the Islamists in Syria. Other militias are based purely on tribalism, and they fight against those whom they consider a threat to the tribe. This is not progress, but a regress into pre-capitalist mode of social existence. The militias subject the working class to backward tribalism. For example, they forced the oil workers to strike to obtain favors for their tribe from what is left of the government. Thus, these militias are destroying the working class as a cohesive class whose objective interests are to overthrow capitalism; instead, they are trying to transform the working class into a cog in the mechanisms of backward tribal politics.

People running around in the streets with guns is not necessarily a sign of a social revolution. These days, in Somalia for example, it can be a sign that the country is slipping backward into barbaric tribal politics. Increasingly, in Libya as in Somalia, the militias terrorize the population, and they do not advocate any progressive or revolutionary change. (For more recent info on the Libyan militias see http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/11/world/africa/libya.html?_r=0.) As in the case of Syria, the RCIT’s views on Libya show that the opportunists have no concept of the basic laws of the class struggle and social change. When the Arab Spring (what the opportunists call the Arab Revolution) did not result in a victory of the working class and the socialist revolution, it was inevitable that it would transform into its opposite, that is, that reactionary counterrevolutionary movements would come to the front and take over the process. Such was the case in Syria and Libya and in Egypt (though in Egypt it was the military, not militias). The failure to transform the Arab Spring into a class struggle against capitalism allowed reactionary religious sects to rise throughout the Middle-East. The civil war in Syria is now expanding to Iraq and Lebanon, where Shiites kills hundreds of Sunnis and vice versa. The immediate future looks pretty bleak right now.

From a longer historical perspective, it is important to understand that the rise of religious reactionary forces started at the end of the 1970’s and early 1980’s. After the betrayals of the working class perpetrated by the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Communist Party, there was a big vacuum in the Middle East. But the failure of the socialists and the left to provide an alternative pushed a big chunk of the masses toward the arms of reaction. This was clearly the case in Iran, where the Mullahs won, and it has also spread to Gaza and now to many places in the Middle East. The defeat of these forces is critical for a revolutionary success in the Middle East.

Can the Class Struggle Manifest Itself through Islamic Forces?

This is what the RCIT and the opportunists claim. Yossi Schwartz, who represents the new RCIT organization in Israel, is transforming Marxism into a bad joke. He writes that:

“The Syrian civil war is a manifestation of class war: the rich Sunni merchants are on the side of Assad – in addition to the capitalists from the Alawites/Shiites, Christians and other sects. On the other side, we see the workers and the poor peasants mostly on the side of the rebels.”

[\(http://www.thecommunists.net/worldwide/africa-and-middle-east/class-struggle-and-religious-sectarianism-in-syria/\)](http://www.thecommunists.net/worldwide/africa-and-middle-east/class-struggle-and-religious-sectarianism-in-syria/)

Schwartz concludes from his “brilliant” observation that: “. . . the class nature of the war is obscured, and the conflict consequently has the outward appearance of a sectarian struggle between Sunnis and Shiites.” (*Ibid.*)

Schwartz and the RCIT use this as a theory justifying support for the rebels. This economism is indeed a bankrupt theory. Since when do Marxists support a side in the class struggle, or in a war, merely because of the social composition of the people who participate in it, without any objective assessment of the class character of that side’s objectives? There are hundreds of examples that illustrate how wrong Schwartz is. Using his method of analysis, we would conclude that we should support the military coup in Egypt. After all, at the time, the vast majority of Egyptian workers supported the coup. But obviously this was not a reason to support the coup. Workers often support fascists and reactionary right-wing causes. For example, in England, there were strikes by trade unionists against immigrants, because these racist workers claimed that immigrants were taking their jobs. Should we support them? After all, they are not only workers, but also trade unionists. But as we know, the answer is absolutely negative. During the Second World War, the great majority of American workers supported US imperialism’s war against Germany. But this was not a reason why we should have supported US imperialism. Similarly, the fact that most US workers support the Democratic Party does not make it a supportable workers’ party. And in Syria itself, the class composition of Lebanon-based Hezbollah consists of workers and the poor. So if we take Schwartz’s argument to its logical conclusion, we should support Hezbollah against the rebels— and thus we should shoot and kill ourselves, because we fight on both sides!

Schwartz, the RCIT, and the rest of the opportunists make a mockery of basic Marxist theory in order to cover up their opportunist appetite. Schwartz tells us that:

“In one respect, the Syrian revolution is similar to the Spanish civil war of the 1930s. In Spain, the imperialists did not send weapons to the Republican forces fighting against Franco’s Nationalist rebels and his much better armed German and Italian allies.

“In civil war Spain, revolutionaries stood shoulder to shoulder with the Republicans, but at the same time opposed the anti-working class policies of the Republican government. In Syria, *militarily* we stand with the opponents of the Assad regime, but give no *political support* to the secular pro-imperialists and the reactionary Islamists.” (*Ibid.*)

Spain and Syria are apples and oranges that the opportunists love to view as similar. But I don’t think that we live in the opportunists’ universe. In Syria, there is no socialist workers’ movement that fights fascism. Rather, there is a civil war among many bourgeois and petty bourgeois factions with a reactionary agenda. In Spain, the working class rose up against fascism. The popular front for the Spanish Republic consisted overwhelmingly of socialist unions and mass workers’ parties. Included in the popular front were the Anarchists, the centrist POUM, and the Communist Party. The majority of the fighters in Spain subjectively wanted to overthrow capitalism. Everybody agrees that we need to support such a mass workers’ movement against the fascists, even though it was misled by the junior bourgeois partners and by the leaders of the workers movement: the Stalinists, the centrists, and the Anarchists. But to say that the civil war in Syria is similar is totally ridiculous. It only manifests a political and theoretical

bankruptcy. Putting the word “militarily” in italics does not change this. The point is that in a civil war in which all sides are reactionary, there is no side that deserves even military support.

The RCIT’s logic about the civil war in Syria is very flawed in general. Michael Pröbsting writes that: “Various leftists have terribly erred in supporting the Assad regime and claiming that US imperialism uses the Syrian rebels as tools.” By declaring that “various leftists” support Assad, Pröbsting fails to distinguish between the Stalinists, who support Assad, and others who support neither the rebels nor Assad. Pröbsting’s statement implies that all those who do not support the rebels support Assad, which is a crude attempt at political manipulation. This is the kind of manipulation that children use when they argue. It was Bush who declared, in regard to the war in Iraq, that (paraphrasing him) “if you are not with us you are against us.” By declaring that the “various leftists” who do not support the rebels must therefore support Assad, Pröbsting falls for the same childish logic spouted by the demagogue Bush: according to Pröbsting’s logic, those who are not with the rebels are against the “Syrian Revolution.”

The CWG in New Zealand and the US are even cruder. In a post on Facebook, Dave Bedggood characterized HWRS’s position on the civil war in Syria as “Another load of neo-stalinist shit about the rebels gassing themselves because they are not really rebels but the CIA or alQaeda.” This is how a three years old argues. Since Bedggood cannot get away with calling HWRS outright Stalinists, he uses the meaningless petty bourgeois term “neo-Stalinist,” as if this fake intellectual does not know that what he is saying is that HWRS has the same position on Syria as the Stalinists. Yet the CWG cannot escape from the implication of their twisted child-like logic that all those against the rebels must be Stalinists.

This kind of logic is the logic of low-level demagogy. Dan Cahill, who has no idea how to separate politics from personal insults or how to write a coherent sentence, posted on Facebook that I and HWRS are “. . . seen to backslide to a Spartacist style position on each of the defining questions of the Arab Spring.” He refers to the Spartacist League’s tendency not to take sides in wars, and he implies that HWRS is a Spartacist sectarian organization that will not take a side in any war from now on. This is, of course, not true, and Cahill will have to hold his breath in anticipation every time there is a war.

Cahill’s calumny against us is not true even in regard to Syria today. We support the Kurds’ military efforts both against Assad and against the rebel scum who have attacked the Kurds. Cahill and company, on the other hand, have to explain why their heroes, the rebels in their “revolution,” have tried to crush the Kurds. But outside vile gossip, Cahill in general is capable of explaining very little. He can only conclude that:

“This [not taking a side in the civil war] puts him [myself] on the side of the barricades with the social-imperialists, who like Obama are not seeking ‘regime change.’ ”

In one sentence Cahill managed to state two fundamentally wrong positions that ignore the basic reality in Syria. First, this twisted sentence says that those who do not support the Islamists—the same Islamists who kill people and cut their throats for not being Islamists—are on the side of the social imperialists. Cahill also says those who do not support the FSA,—the same FSA that wants to establish a bourgeois client state in Syria on behalf of imperialism—are also on the side of the social imperialists. It does not even occur to him that it is, in fact, the FSA who are on the side of the social imperialists. Otherwise, why would the FSA ask American imperialism to intervene in Syria and to send them weapons so that they can erect a pro-imperialist regime in Syria if they win the war? Second, in the same sentence, Cahill manages to assert that US imperialism wants the Assad regime to remain intact. The same nonsense is repeated by other opportunists who support the rebels. On one hand, these right-wing centrists who support reaction tell us that Syria is a playground for Russia, and that Russian imperialism wants to oust the US as the main imperialist power in the Middle East. On the other hand, they (and Cahill) tell us that the US also supports Assad!! Such stupid positions are contradicted by everything that the US has said or done in Syria. This confusion is laughable. Even grammar school children have a better idea of what the US’s objectives are in Syria.

In Cahill's school for idiots, we are supposed to understand that the US is a supporter of Assad. Thus, all the statements by US officials that call for the overthrow of Assad's regime, as well as the recent efforts by the US to intervene directly in Syria and bomb Assad's army, are just smokescreens. In reality, Cahill tells us, the US is a supporter of Assad! By accompanying this nonsense with profound personal insults such as "the leading light of HWRS eats ice cream for breakfast at 11 AM" to back up his political confusion on Syria, Cahill only manifests the political bankruptcy of the CWG in the US and New Zealand. It has been a consistent method of the CWGers to use personal insults to back up their political positions when arguing against HWRS. They use these insults as a substitute for any objective analysis. Evidently, they fear that their arguments, such as that the US (and Israel!) supports Assad's regime, are so weak that they are needed to be shored up with personal insults and such "profound" analysis as the accusation that we are "neo-Stalinists." It is not surprising that a comrade who was reading this on Facebook wrote "gosh i do not understand a word".

On the right of the rebels to ask imperialism to arm them

Finally, let us examine the position that since Syria's civil war is a popular revolution, the rebels have the right to request weapons from US imperialism. This is an old position that was very popular in WP. WP took this position several times, but the most memorable one is when WP argued that Bosnia had the right to receive arms from imperialism because it was supposedly fighting for liberation against the oppressive Serbs. So far I have not read any document in which the RCIT calls openly for imperialism to supply the rebels with arms, but the RCIT does call for the international working class to supply the rebels with weapons.

As for the CWG (US), their paper says that "The revolutionaries on the ground have never asked for US/NATO to intervene militarily. They have asked for weapons to defeat Assad and received no heavy weapons." (http://www.scribd.com/fullscreen/165586510?access_key=key-2jzj9efrgitai0hj3m56&allow_share=true&view_mode=scroll). For the CWG, evidently, the units of the FSA who are participating in the so-called "Arab Revolution" led by the Syrian bourgeoisie are somehow "revolutionaries on the ground."

It is hard to imagine a circumstance when it would be correct to support a request for weapons from imperialism. In the abstract, one can argue that it could be correct to do so in a war for liberation against imperialism, when the liberation fighters are trying to use to their advantage a conflict of interests in their specific area between two imperialist powers. But the civil war in Syria is not about liberation from imperialism. By no stretch of the imagination is it possible to accept this. The majority of the masses are no longer taking a side in the conflict. Those who support a side do it because they are caught up in the frenzy of killing people who belong to different religious sects. These people are being used by the equally reactionary forces of Assad and of the rebels. For the Islamists and the FSA, this is a civil war to oust Assad, not a war for liberation from imperialism. The Islamists want to replace Assad with a state governed by Sharia law, while most currents within the FSA want to replace Assad with a capitalist state subordinated to US imperialism. The FSA wants to receive weapons in exchange for creating a client state that is a puppet of US imperialism. But imperialism does not give away weapons for free. The conditions for such a gift always include the subordination of these weapons to imperialist interests, and the absence of any political program and actions that are independent from imperialism. For these reasons, the reception of any weapons by the FSA would necessarily be tied to the FSA's betrayal of the masses and political dependency on imperialism. It is therefore, unsupportable.

In conclusion

The Syrian civil war exemplifies a phenomenon that is spreading from Africa to the Middle East. The intensifying effects of climate change and the growing economic crisis of world capitalism are triggering reactionary civil wars. The civil wars in Somalia and Syria are the beginning of a new type of war that will spread in the future, as capitalist civilization begins to collapse because of climate change and the

explosive contradictions of decaying capitalism. This combined pressure of climate change and decaying capitalism will bring about conditions in which national states collapse and are subdivided into mini states controlled by warlords, religious sects, and gangsters. As this progresses, the national bourgeoisie as a unified nationalist ruling class will fall apart. All this will lead to a type of barbarism that feeds on religious and tribal hatred, **as people return to the safety of their religious sects and tribes.** The first indicator pointing to the collapse of civilization can be seen when the clock of history begins to go backward. In this case, capitalism is combined with the return of feudal divisions based on religious sects and tribes. With this combination comes a return to the barbarism of the Dark Ages.

A longer article would be needed to explain thoroughly the effects of climate change on decaying capitalism. The tools of Marxist thought need to be sharpened and developed in order to understand fully what we are facing. The writings of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky do not provide answers to the problems posed by these dramatic potential developments, because climate change and the collapse of civilization was not an issue when they lived. Nobody in their right mind could have thought then about trying to build socialism (in reality the stage before socialism, which is the dictatorship of the proletariat) under the conditions of extreme scarcity that climate change will produce. But this may become a reality when the socialist revolution succeeds.

The explosive speed at which capitalism is causing climate change is a phenomenon that has never before taken place on this planet. Most reformists and centrists do not understand Marxist theory, even in its traditional context, and they do not have the basic tools to understand the rapid evolutionary developments that are taking place now. Lacking the dialectical tools to understand how the Syrian civil war is connected to all of this, the opportunistic left has no choice but to dig even deeper into opportunism. This is why positions such as giving support to Islamist forces that want to establish Sharia law, which were unthinkable in the past, have now become acceptable in the opportunist left. Thus, it can be said that these right wing centrists are turning into reactionary centrists, or, more accurately, into centrists who tail the forces of reaction.

Dave Winter, Oct. 24, 2013